

ON THE SHAPE OF AHOM COINS

Ahom coins are usually found struck in two shapes — octagonal and round. Most of their known Mohurs and rupees and their halves and quarters are octagonal in shape. A few of them are also round and square. All Ahom kings that are known to have struck only a coronation-money, minted these in octagonal shape. Later, when their coinage became an annual or rather a regular affair some round and occasionally square pieces were also minted. Otherwise the usual round pieces of the Ahoms are coins of smaller denominations such as 1/8, 1/16 and 1/32. These smaller denomination coins were perhaps minted in round shape for technical reasons. Since all coronation year issues are octagonal in shape it can well be said that this shape has some special significance in the context of the Ahom history and is a unique feature of their coinage.

It is not known for certain as to how and why this octagonal shape was adopted by the Ahoms for their coinage. Some scholars have, however, tried to explain this feature of their coinage. Gait¹ held that this peculiarity of shape was in accordance with a statement in the *Yoginūtantra* which refers to the Ahom kingdom as eight sided. This explanation has largely been followed by subsequent writers on Ahom coinage² and history. Our friend P. K. Bhattacharyya³ has criticised the explanation offered by Gait about the eight cornered shape of the Ahom coins. He states that *Yoginūtantra* is a late work, as such a statement found in it could not have determined the shape of a specie that ori-

1. E. A. GAIT, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 276.

2. V. A. SMITH, *Catalogue of The Coins in the Indian Museum, Calcutta*, Vol. I, Oxford, 1906, pp. 294 ff.; J. ALLAN, in *Numismatic Chronicle* (henceforth NC), Vol. IX (1909), pp. 300 ff.; A. W. BOTHAM, *Catalogue of the Provincial Coin Cabinet of Assam*, Allahabad, 1930, p. 447.

3. P. K. BHATTACHARYYA, in *IS*, 10, No. 3 (April-June 1969), pp. 275 ff.; and in *JNSI*, 32, Pt. I (1970), pp. 43-5.

ginated in an earlier period. To us it appears that Bhattacharyya's objection in this regard is not valid. It is true that *Yoginītantra* is a late work⁴, but perhaps it is not later than the period of King Pratapa Simha (1611-1649 A.D.) who initiated the octagonal shape of the Ahom coinage. The fact that Assamese historical tradition refers to this work in the context of the coins of Pratapa Simha shows that the work is earlier in date than this king. It is therefore appropriate to discuss this issue in its proper context.

Kasinath Tamuli Phukan⁵, who compiled a history of the Ahoms in 1835 A.D. under the orders of Purandara Simha, the last Ahom King, has discussed in some detail the introduction and issue of Ahom coins by king Pratapa Simha. This discussion is also repeated in another Buranji compiled at a still later date by Harakanta Barua Sadaramin⁶. Thus, it is said in both these chronicles that when Pratapa Simha decided to issue his own coins he consulted his scholars on this matter as he wanted his coins to be unique. It was then suggested to him that he should issue octagonal coins, as his kingdom, the kingdom of Saumara, was octagonal in shape according to the *Yoginītantra*⁷. Thus, it seems that the *Yoginītantra* was invoked only to impress upon the king that his kingdom was octagonal in shape. Therefore, Pratapa Simha issued octagonal coins in keeping with the fact or rather the tradition that his kingdom was eight cornered. We do not know whether his kingdom actually was eight cornered, probably it was not, but it seems certain that there was a tradition to this effect. It is also possible that this tradition with regard to the shape of Saumara was known in the time of Pratapa Simha.

We do not know the source of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan on this point. It is, however, possible to assume that he had access to some document or historical tradition on this issue. Another possibility is that he was himself puzzled by this shape of Ahom coins and hence worked out a reasonably possible explanation thereof. Under the present state of our knowledge we cannot do anything better than to accept his explanation with regard to the octagonal shape of Ahom specie.

4. The *Yoginītantra* mentions the Koch King Viśvasimha (1515-40) and hence is supposed to be a later work. P. K. BHATTACHARYYA, in *IS*, 10, No. 3 (1969), p. 277, assigns it to the last decade of the 17th century.

5. KASINATH TAMULI PHUKAN, *Assam Buranji Sara* (Edited by P. C. Choudhury, Gauhati, 1964), pp. 24-5.

6. HARAKANTA BARUA SADARAMIN, *Assam Buranji* (Edited by S. K. Bhuyan, Gauhati, 1962), p. 37. The author of this book says in his introduction that his book was based on that of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan's *Buranji*.

7. The relevant portion of the *Yoginītantra* is quoted both in *Assam Buranji Sara* (p. 24) and *Assam Buranji* (p. 31). It is as follows:

*aṣṭakonañcha Saumāram Yatra dikkaravāsini,
tasmīnvasanti ye lokājñānādajñānatopi vā
tepi devyāḥ prasādena siddhim gacchanti nānyathā.*

There is, however, another possibility with regard to the octagonal shape of the Ahom coins. It is more reasonable to think that this shape of the Ahom coinage was adopted in imitation of a similar design found on the coins of the Sultans of Bengal. Some coins of the Sultans bear part of the legend, at times, on the obverse and at others on the reverse, within an octagonal border⁸. It is this octagonal border of the coinage of Bengal that possibly influenced the Ahoms to adopt an octagonal shape for their coinage. The octagonal borders, met with on the coinage of Bengal, are rather ornamental-made of arcs turning inward, or are formed by interlacing squares — but there is no doubt about their being octagons. And these were used to determine the octagonal shape of the Ahom coins.

Bhattacharyya states that most «Ahom rulers were devout worshippers of Lord Śiva, and it seems probable that this peculiar shape of the Ahom coins was the result of Saivite influence. According to such conception Lord Śiva protects the whole universe with His Eight Forms». This is perhaps not tenable in this context. Tantricism was also very popular in Assam during the Ahom rule and the rulers were also considerably influenced by it. We all know that diagrams of various shapes and size were used in this form of worship. It is quite possible therefore, to presume that the shape of the Ahom coins may have been adopted under Tantrik influence. It is also possible that this shape was inspired by the hands of the presiding deity of the Kingdom (*dikkara-vāsinī*). In fact the octagonal nature of Saumara itself may have been conceived by the eight handed form of the deity.

Explanations apart, the available evidence suggests that the octagonal shape of the Ahom coin was in all probability inspired and influenced by the octagonal border found on the coins of Bengal.

8. The octagonal border is used on the following coins of the Bengal Sultans:

- (i) The obverse of a coin of Sikandar Shah Bin Iliyas Shah (A.D. 1358-1389) bears the legend in an octagon; H. NELSON WRIGHT, *Catalogue of Coins in the Indian Museum Calcutta* (henceforth IMC), Vol. II (Oxford, 1907), No. 55, p. 155.
- (ii) Some coins of Shihabuddin Bayazid Shah (A.D. 1409-1414) contain part of the legend in an «enclosure surrounded by eight arcs», *ibid.*, Nos. 90-92, pp. 160-61.
- (iii) A coin of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (A.D. 1414-1431) also has a similar enclosure on its reverse, *ibid.*, No. 102, p. 162.
- (iv) A coin of Nasiruddin Muhammad Shah (A.D. 1442-1459) contains part of the legend on obverse in an octagon, *ibid.*, No. 112, p. 164.
- (v) A coin of Jalaluddin Fath Shah (A.D. 1481-1486) also contains an octagonal border, *ibid.*, No. 156, p. 170.